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ABSTRACT

The author of this paper, a writing teacher who is also writing a handbook for McGraw-Hill, finds herself in a conceptual, pedagogical quandary that leaves her feeling like a fraud. According to the paper, she sees her job as helping her students gain the editing skills they want, but she has not yet succeeded in integrating the teaching of editing techniques with her rhetorical, situated pedagogies. The paper contains four pieces (which do not make a linear, coherent argument): a narrative snapshot; a disciplinary context; the tensions in "Jennie's" work and in the author's; and the handbook as way station. It concludes that in her next entry into the composition classroom, the teacher/author wants to use the handbook as a "participant in" editing conversations, not the conclusion of them. (Contains 21 references.) (NKA)

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The Fraud of Composition Pedagogy: What I Learned from Writing a Handbook

Rebecca Moore Howard
Conference on College Composition and Communication
Chicago, IL, 21 March 2002

There are four parts to my presentation today. Together they do not make a linear, coherent argument. Rather, the four pieces point to a conceptual, pedagogical quandary in which I presently find myself, a quandary that leaves me feeling like a fraud. I'm a handbook author (author-in-progress, I should say), and I believe in the work I am doing. I actually enjoy it; I find it intellectually rewarding to write a handbook. I'm a composition teacher, and I believe in the work I am doing. I actually enjoy it; I find it intellectually rewarding to meet writers over a text in progress and participate in their discoveries and problem-solving as they figure out themselves, their audience, their text, and the relationships between them. I believe in my pedagogy as a place where I negotiate my purposes in teaching composition with my students' purposes in taking composition with my colleagues' and administrators' purposes in endorsing composition. I understand that those purposes are not in full accord; my students and my colleagues are apt to place considerably greater emphasis on correctly edited texts than I am. I'm much more apt to see that emphasis on correctly edited texts as a witting or unwitting participating in a hierarchical social system than they are. But I am not inclined to regard my students' desire for correctly edited texts as a matter of false consciousness that my critical pedagogy must correct. Rather, I see my job as helping them gain the editing skills they want—while at the same time helping them to understand what is being surrendered

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in the bargain. I feel like a fraud because I have not yet succeeded in integrating the teaching of editing techniques and with my rhetorical, situated pedagogies.

Piece 1: Narrative snapshot

So when I saw a chance to write a handbook for McGraw-Hill, I jumped at it. I'd always wanted to write a handbook—though why, I now no longer know. Now that I'm deep into the drafting, my original purposes are lost to me.

Anyhow. So I started writing this handbook. I wrote the first section (on multiple literacies). And I wrote it. And I wrote it. And finally my editor, Lisa Moore, thought it might be ready to send out for review. But let's send a grammar chapter, too, she said.

So I started writing a grammar chapter. "Verbs," to be exact. I wasn't worried; after all, I'm a linguist by training. I know my grammar. And I'm not new to writing for the textbook trade; Sandra Jamieson and I did *The Bedford Guide to Teaching Writing in the Disciplines* back in 1995.

Anyhow! So I started writing this "Verbs" chapter. And I wrote. And I wrote. And I began to think I was never going to get the darned thing done. But I was happy: I was writing a handbook a new way—from students' writing. I had tons of writing samples that students all over the country had sent me, and each time I began to explain a grammatical principle, I went through their papers, seeing how they did (and didn't) handle it.

And my explanations got longer —— and longer ——— and more and more detailed. I had a whole bookcase of other people's handbooks beside me, and as I consulted them to see how they handled the issue in question, I could see that what they said often didn't address the real issues that were arising in the students' papers. So I wrote. And I wrote.

Gradually I began to realize that the style and editing issues that students confront in their writing are far more complex than our handbook representations would have it. And I realized, too, that I knew far less about grammar—and about students' writing—than I had thought. The neat little categories into which I'd sifted students' work as I responded to their papers were just ludicrous. No wonder they learned so little from my efforts to teach them editing! I didn't know what I was talking about, neither did the handbooks, and neither did the students. The complexity of their students' writing far exceeded handbooks' and teachers' attempts to categorize, label, and instruct.

Piece 2: Disciplinary context

In 1897, Gertrude Buck was arguing with F.A. Barbour about what types of sentence diagramming were most useful. A century later, in 1997, Robert J. Connors was asserting that formal grammar instruction of all stripes was conducted only out of "ignorance" (164); as far as he was concerned, the discipline of composition studies was at least in part defined by its shared knowledge of the futility of grammar instruction. "Traditional grammar did not flourish openly," Connors said, "especially after the famous

and seemingly final verdict of *Research in Written Composition* in 1963 that 'the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible, or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing,' but it continued its curious half-life in its accustomed lair: handbooks and workbooks (169). Let me repeat that last sentence, because it is a remarkable one, coming as it does from a handbook author: "'the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible, or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing,' but it continued its curious half-life in its accustomed lair: handbooks and workbooks (169). When Connors wrote this in his 1997 history of composition studies, his hot-selling *St. Martin's Handbook* was in its third edition.

The 1963 *Research in Written Composition* to which Connors refers is a book from which many historians now date the beginning of "real" composition studies. "Real" composition studies, then, begins with a rejection of grammar instruction. Part III of Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer is titled "The State of Knowledge about Composition." Under a subheading "Instructional Factors Influencing Composition" is the heading "Ineffectiveness of Instruction in Formal Grammar." That the section is titled in the form of an argument is unusual in this table of contents, whose headings are usually described in unmodified noun phrases.

The entry is two pages long. It acknowledges "valuable descriptions of productive programs and procedures" such as Kitzhaber's analysis of college writing programs. The findings of these reports, however, are given no credence, because they "have a different approach to truth than the scientific studies which fall within the

purview of this report" (38). Braddock, Jones, and Schoer's conclusion is based entirely on quantitative studies: "In view of the widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing" (37-38). "Actual composition" does not include formal grammar instruction, because no quantitative studies have shown its efficacy.

From that claim made 39 years ago has arisen the exorbitant and remarkable disciplinary stance against engaged, sustained teaching of editing. W. Ross Winterowd in 1998 declares, "Massive evidence leads one to conclude that systematic grammatical study *of any kind* [my emphases] does not improve one's writing or speaking ability" (43). His evidence? The Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer review.

Somewhat earlier, John Clifford had made a similar claim, adducing different evidence: "In 1929, a review of empirical studies compiled by Rollo Lyman overwhelmingly demonstrated that direct instruction in grammar did not have a significant effect on the student's actual writing." But grammar continued to be taught, because it was arcane, it was good discipline, and it affirmed the language of the privileged. "[A]s Paul Diederich used to say, grammar instruction is probably harmful to writing since it takes the place of direct writing instruction" (47). A 1929 review of empirical studies, and the appeal to the authority of Paul Diederich. Out goes grammar instruction!

Rationale for incredulity

Clifford justifies his dismissal of grammar instruction on the basis that it serves the purposes of domination and exploitation (48), and it is here that the incredulity toward grammar instruction resonates for many of us. Kathryn T. Flannery detects in E.D. Hirsch, Jr., a "need to promote homogeneity of purpose and consequently homogeneity of product." Hirsch's *Philosophy of Composition* and its respect for standard forms also canonizes Western, white, male, upper-middle-class values, says Flannery (30).

The objections to grammar instruction are not only social but rhetorical. In his revered article "Use Definite, Specific, Concrete Language," Richard Ohmann asks "whether in teaching a skill like [being definite, specific, and concrete] we may inadvertently suggest to students that they be less inquiring and less intelligent than they are capable of being, and whether the teaching of basic skills is an ideological activity" ("Use Definite" 390). Commissioned to write an introduction about grammar for the much-heralded first edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary*, Ohmann opens by acknowledging the existence of prescriptive grammar, and then the essay talks entirely about transformational generative grammar and its possibilities for a universalized understanding of mind.

Fifth Boylston chair of rhetoric at Harvard, Adams Sherman Hill led that university's literacy efforts from 1876 to 1904. It was he who instituted the diagnostic examination that was quickly adopted at other institutions. He was disappointed with the results; too many Harvard freshmen failed the exam. So Hill turned his efforts to the reform of secondary education, which he charged with the teaching of "the fundamentals."

Despite years of this effort, Harvard freshmen continued to fail the exam at an alarming rate. Yet, as Sharon Crowley wryly observes, Hill continued to administer the exam, convinced that it would bring needed pressure on the secondary schools to prepare their students better (67-69). He never gave up.

Hill's solution to the grammar quandary is one still heard today: secondary schools should do a better job. Peter Elbow brings a new twist to the issue when he recommends that composition teachers require correctness in student writing. Elbow does not, however, advocate teaching grammar, but rather encouraging students who don't know the standards of correctness to have someone else edit their work. If secondary schools don't do their job, hired editors should.

In all this discussion, few voices assert that editing doesn't matter. The more radical interpretations of the "Students' Right" moment have subsided, with teachers now wrestling with the exclusionary cultural work accomplished by standard forms, while recognizing the social validation and power of that standard. Interestingly, their anger turns at times to the writers of handbooks, who become the scapegoats for the now-reviled current-traditional pedagogy. Some compositionists assert that the standard should be determined by the usage of the majority rather than the usage of the socially or intellectually powerful. Sharon Zuber and Ann M. Reed, for example, identify grammarians and handbook writers as the enemy who *prevent* the establishment of an egalitarian standard. Grammarians are "content to ignore" evidence, they say, and handbook writers "have a stake in conserving their linguistic authority" (522).

Piece 3: The tensions in Jennie's work—and mine

Here's Wendy Bishop's account of what takes place in composition classes: "Most composition textbooks and teachers proceed dizzily through revision discussions, assuming assigning drafts and allowing for peer response will do the work that needs to be done. It doesn't. We need to be teaching grammar(s) for writers" (179).

Here, in my responses to my student Jennie, are one teacher's attempts to teach grammar for writers:

My response to a draft of Jennie's work.

. . . it seems to me that you're pursuing an important argument. You deftly identify the sources you're working with in ¶2--a sound tactic--and you (apparently) go on to state your own point of view. That last sentence of ¶2 seems to be your thesis statement--but then it's never mentioned again in the essay. So your thesis statement is the penultimate sentence? If so, it seems rather elusive, not very concrete. And the conclusion doesn't help; it, too, eludes. Look at the final sentence of the essay: it sets up a false contradiction. The first clause begins with "although," yet the second clause agrees with the first! So the essay seems to be pursuing an important argument, but never quite articulates it.

The anecdote about your Fox experience toward the end is very effective and well told.

Style: (1) Some strange sentence constructions. Try reading your draft aloud; that should help you catch these. (2) Dump the construction "as seen in"; it's very stilted.

Editing: (1) Watch out for runons. See sect. 19 of your handbook. (2) Differentiate "your" and "you're." See p. 434 of the handbook Glossary of Usage. (3) Work on indefinite pronoun agreement: see section 16d.

Can we get together to work on your current paper, the one that's due Tuesday, or on your last paper? I'm available on Tuesday and Thursday morning this week, as well as Friday afternoon. Let me know if you're interested.

And I now consider this attempt to be fraudulent. It is not so much an attempt to teach as it is a demand that the student learn. And the invitation to work with the student, too, is fraudulent, when considered in the context of what she had written to me:

Jennie's in-class writing. (Prompt: What was new, important, puzzling, or confusing in the assigned reading from your handbook?)

I don't really see how the reading was suppossed to impress me or show me something that I hadn't already heard a thousand times before. I didn't really read the handbook as looking for something to impress me; I read as "here I go again reading another monotinous page on grammar" I don't really understand how I was supposed to have pages about nouns and iterjections leave a lasting impression on me. I know there is a point to all this reading, but none of it (in the handbook anyway) does anything to capture my attention let alone leave any sort of a impression on my mind other than I don't want to read anymore

How could I possibly expect that this disenchanted student would accept my invitation? Even though she wanted to gain admission to the prestigious Newhouse School of Communications, where the faculty are known for their dedication to students' adherence to standard forms (they actually give a grammar exam and remedial tutorials), it was clear that she held no expectations of learning these standard forms by standard means. She wore her anger into every class meeting. For me she serves as an extreme example of the need, desire, disaffection, and skepticism that all my students bring to the prospect of learning standard forms by standard means. They know it matters; they believe they need it; and they do not believe they will acquire it.

Piece 4: The handbook as way station

Where does this leave me as a composition teacher and a handbook author? Bishop advocates teaching "grammar as style," which means teaching the rules as well as alternative forms (180); writers need to understand why they are making textual choices

(181). One of Bishop's ideas: "Discuss writers' options, ask for suggestions about how texts can be made riskier and more conventional, how style can be altered" (184).

Sounds nice; I agree; but I don't think this gets to the crux of the matter. I believe the handbook does. I don't believe a composition class is going to teach much about standard forms, but I do believe it can teach students the importance of and a skepticism toward the social work accomplished by the standard forms. And the tool that makes this formula work is the handbook.

The mistake I made, and the one that so many teachers make, is to regard the handbook as a repository of correct answers to questions. This is fallacious on one level because any handbook author knows that the "rules" in the handbook are not only temporally variable but spatially, as well. The answers to grammar questions in my handbook aren't necessarily identical with those of Chris Anson and Bob Schwegler, or those of Diana Hacker. On many issues, the handbook author is making choices based on social, grammatical, and rhetorical interpretations.

On a more important level, it is fallacious to think of the handbook as the repository of answers because that is anti-rhetorical. Neither the composition teacher nor the composition class is going to teach the standard forms, and certainly the handbook isn't, either. Patrick Hartwell makes the persuasive case that articulation of formal rules is plausible only for those who already possess tacit knowledge of those rules.

In my next entry into the composition classroom, I want to use the handbook as a *participant in* editing conversations, not the conclusion of them. If editing is not treated as a final moment of ornamentation in a linear writing process but a range of questions

that are potentially integral to any juncture in composing; if the handbook is treated as an authoritative participant in debate rather than the last word in it; and if issues of the standard are recognized for their rhetorical variability and cultural work in maintaining hierarchies, it could be a very successful pedagogy, indeed.

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